

Gerald L. “Jerry” Shook: Visionary for the Profession of Behavior Analysis

Brian A. Iwata, University of Florida

Mark L. Sundberg, Sundberg & Associates

James E. Carr, Behavior Analyst Certification Board



Gerald L. (Jerry) Shook, 1948–2011

Gerald L. (Jerry) Shook was born on August 13, 1948 in Battle Creek, Michigan. He did not have to travel far for his professional training, receiving his BS, MS, and PhD degrees from Western Michigan University (WMU), but his subsequent travels took him to all parts of the United States and to many foreign countries. Over his 42-year career, Jerry was an academician, administrator, and consultant who played a leadership role in a number of professional organizations, but he will be remembered most for creating the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) and, as a result, essentially establishing the field of behavior analysis as a profession. Jerry died on November 11, 2011 after a protracted battle with cancer and is survived by his wife, B. J. Quinn, his mother, Candace Shook, and his sister, Judith Graham. We knew Jerry from several different perspectives and offer a composite view of a friend and colleague; a wonderful man whose contributions, although apparent now, will become even more significant in years to come.

Jerry's Early Years

Jerry's first exposure to behavior analysis occurred in 1967 when he took an undergraduate course from Richard Malott and Donald Whaley at WMU. Although he initially planned on becoming a dentist, Jerry maintained an interest in social issues and took a number of courses in sociology and psychology; he also had a strong background in science from his coursework in high school. Jerry was fascinated by Malott and Whaley's descriptions of how science could deal with the human problems everyone was wrestling with at the time. He soon changed his major to psychology, with a double major in biology.

In his senior year at WMU, Jerry applied for a job at a new program, the Kalamazoo Valley Multihandicap Center (KVMC), that provided educational and behavioral services for children and adults with multiple handicaps, including autism and developmental disabilities. Jim Kaye had received a grant to start the program and hired Jerry as a one-to-one therapist working directly with the students. Here Jerry found his lifelong passion—his desire to see science applied to social issues had come to fruition. He soon became the assistant director and then the director of KVMC.

By the mid-1970s, KVMC grew to serving over 60 students. The program became a popular site for WMU psychology students who needed practicum credit or employment. Approximately 1,000 WMU psychology students did their practicum and internship, and/or worked as salaried therapists under the supervision and direction of Jerry Shook during the 1970s. Thus, KVMC was one of the first large-scale, collaborative applied behavior analysis (ABA) programs in the country to serve individuals with autism or other developmental disabilities. The program was unique for a number of reasons. First, individuals served by the program presented some of the biggest challenges to the human service systems in southern Michigan. Many of these individuals were former residents of state hospitals or were at risk for such placements. KVMC gave

these students a transition program back to the community or a prevention program to keep them out of the state hospital. Second, Jerry established a behavioral systems management approach that he learned from his coursework with Richard Malott. Jerry said he simply “applied Malott’s Psych 150 system to the human service system of KVMC.” Jerry managed by objectives, always required data from his staff, used public posting of staff performance, and maintained excellent reinforcement contingencies for his staff.

A third unique aspect of KVMC was the entry level of staff and the staff training and promotion system developed by Jerry. Most WMU students began working at KVMC for the practicum requirement of Psych 360, the sixth course in behavior analysis for WMU’s undergraduate psychology major, which focused on ABA. Prior to this class, students had five courses in behavior analysis, including Richard Malott’s introductory course with a rat lab, Jack Michael’s class on verbal behavior, and Dave Lyon’s class on the experimental analysis of behavior with a pigeon lab. These students were then sent out to KVMC where Jerry and his staff taught them how to apply their academic training in a clinical-educational context. This level of entry staff is unheard of today. Approximately 30–40 students each semester participated in the practicum program. At the end of each semester Jerry offered 5–10 students a highly coveted part-time paid position; from this smaller group, he subsequently selected approximately 10 full-time staff members, all of whom were graduate students in WMU’s behavior analysis program. Given this high level of staff expertise, the students at KVMC made unprecedented gains, and many future behavior analysts learned the power of behavior analysis and its applied methodology. Jerry’s goal was to make KVMC the leading behavioral program for persons with disabilities in the world. Simultaneously, he sought to provide the highest level of staff training in behavior analysis in the world. In hindsight, these goals were clearly accomplished.

A fourth feature of KVMC was Jerry's commitment to research as a means of maintaining high clinical standards. He encouraged his staff to conduct empirical evaluations of their clinical work and to present their findings at professional conferences such as the Midwestern Association for Behavior Analysis (MABA, forerunner to ABA) and the American Psychological Association (APA). He also made it possible for several professors from WMU's psychology department such as Robert Hawkins, Brian Iwata, Dick Malott, and Jack Michael to establish varied lines of research. During Jerry's years at KVMC, over 100 WMU masters theses and doctoral dissertations were conducted. Included among that research were over 50 projects by Jack Michael and his students on the application of Skinner's analysis of language, which provided a foundation for the "verbal behavior" approach to assessment and intervention now found in many programs serving children with autism. During this same time period at KVMC, Brian Iwata and his students conducted numerous studies on language, task analysis approaches to instruction, community survival skills, and the very beginning of his work on problem behavior. Eleven of Brian's first 20 research publications were conducted at KVMC.

Jerry created an incredibly vibrant verbal community for behavior analysts interested in the treatment of persons with disabilities. He also turned many young psychology students into skilled researchers, clinicians, and professional behavior analysts. Literally hundreds of behavior analysts practicing today attribute their skills to the initial applied training they received from Jerry Shook and the KVMC program. Although Jerry left KVMC in 1980, the program has continued on for 30 years, later as the "Croyden Avenue School" and currently the "Woods Edge School" in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Jerry in Transition

After completing his PhD, Jerry accepted a faculty position at SUNY College at Buffalo in 1980. Although comfortable in his academic role because he had been involved in teaching since his undergraduate days at WMU, he missed the involvement in clinical work that his position at KVMC had provided. Thus, when the opportunity arose to establish a collaborative clinical program at a major medical school, Jerry moved to Georgetown in 1983. He worked out the details of the program and identified a clinical-research site only to find that budgetary support promised initially had shrunk to the point where it would not accommodate a program of the quality that he envisioned. Rather than persisting in what most likely would have been a futile effort, Jerry took advantage of another opportunity—one that would set the stage for the remainder of his career.

Jerry accepted the newly created position of senior behavior analyst with the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services in 1984 and spent the next 6 years managing behavioral services to individuals with developmental disabilities on a statewide basis. Overseeing the most well-developed system of behavior analysis in the country, Jerry first established regional coordination of behavioral

services, recruited almost a dozen PhDs who were graduates of our premier programs to fill these regional positions, and provided ongoing guidance and consultation to them. He coordinated a peer-review committee comprised of faculty from several universities, which conducted prescriptive evaluations of public and private service programs throughout the state. He served as liaison to the working group that formed the Florida Association for Behavior Analysis (FABA) and subsequently served as FABA's legislative liaison. He garnered support for innovative clinical programs and clinical-research initiatives. Most important, he served as point person for continued revision of the state's "manual" for behavioral services and its fledgling program to certify behavior analysts as competent to implement procedures outlined in the manual. Thus, his work in Florida was reminiscent of the system he had created at KVMC but on a larger scale.

When Jerry arrived in Florida, the certification process was managed on an in-house basis. He quickly saw the need for external oversight consistent with that used for other professions and, after several years of hard work and delicate negotiation, arranged for the program to be administered by the Florida Department of Professional Regulation in 1987. Other states began to notice the precedent that had been set in Florida, and California, New York, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, and Texas developed their own certification programs based on the Florida model.

Seeing firsthand the effect of certification in raising the baseline of service quality on a large scale and recognizing its implications for the field, Jerry anticipated the need for a national certification program in behavior analysis, and he was uniquely prepared for the task of creating it. He could not accomplish that goal given the demands of his current position, so he made a bold and risky move in 1990 by setting off on his own. As a consultant with a more flexible schedule, Jerry established a plan for national certification in his "free time," and spent almost a decade laying the necessary groundwork for a national certification program. He developed a task list of competencies covering the areas of basic principles, applications, consultation, and ethics, which eventually became the blueprint for many graduate training programs in applied behavior analysis. He organized an advisory group comprised of professionals and consumers to provide input about the certification process and general issues related to practice, he contracted with a national testing firm to develop the certification exam, he listened to and attempted to accommodate the interests of professional organizations, and he worked with universities to establish curricula. Although he benefitted from help provided by many along the way, Jerry was the driving force who made everything happen. His efforts culminated in the creation of the Behavior Analysis Certification Board (BACB) in 1998.

Jerry and the BACB

Jerry served as the BACB's chief executive officer for 13 incredibly productive years. Initially, he worked without salary, and he and his wife took out a second mortgage to enable him

to travel and meet with an endless series of representatives from state departments of mental health and developmental disabilities, behavior analysis organizations, advocacy groups, legislators, and insurance regulators. His first years at the BACB also were spent refining the credentialing process that would soon become integral to the discipline: the master's/doctoral-level Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) and the bachelor's-level Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analyst (BCaBA). Jerry convened and oversaw numerous workgroups of experts who developed or revised every aspect of the certification programs, including content task lists for the examinations, coursework and experience requirements, ethical guidelines and disciplinary standards, and cutoff scores, among others. In addition to managing these ongoing tasks, Jerry developed the operational infrastructure for the business and directly oversaw all of the activity of the BACB. In the early years, this often meant that Jerry would fly to various parts of the country and personally administer the examination, sometimes to only a handful of applicants. Jerry's diligence and attention to quality control quickly became trademarks of the BACB and garnered increasing support from professional organizations, regulatory bodies, and consumers over the years. There are now over 10,000 BACB certificants worldwide, and recent applicants have taken their examinations at state-of-the-art computer testing centers.

One of Jerry's guiding principles for the BACB was continual, incremental upgrading of the certification standards. Although he valued high standards, he knew that benchmark-level training requirements (e.g., a PhD from WMU) could not be met by most typically trained behavior analysts or provided by many university programs. Thus, Jerry introduced over a dozen increases in certification requirements, covering all areas of competence: degrees, coursework, experience, and supervision. These changes were introduced systematically with careful consideration of their impact on consumers, applicants, and university curricula. One of Jerry's proudest accomplishments was recognition of the quality of the BACB credentialing program when it was accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies in 2007.

The development of uniform standards by the BACB, combined with increasing demand for behavior-analytic services, had an enormous impact on training and led to a surge in university training programs. There are currently 194 universities that offer BACB approved course sequences, and approximately half of these originated after the BACB's inception. These programs not only produced the much-needed professionals that are at the heart of the BACB's mission, but also established new faculty positions that likely would not have otherwise existed.

One of Jerry's main passions was the development of professional standards in countries where behavior analysis was still emerging as a relatively new field. To date, 22 BACB approved course sequences have been established outside of the United States, including programs in Saudi Arabia and Russia. In addition, Jerry oversaw translation of the BACB examinations into Chinese and Spanish. These achievements

were the result of countless trips and years of planning and curriculum development, which have had worldwide impact: There are currently over 600 BACB certificants in 42 countries outside of the United States, with no signs that recent growth will soon abate. This is truly a remarkable outcome, especially considering that it evolved from a state certification program in less than 20 years.

As a corollary to Jerry's work on development of the BACB's programs, he was instrumental in creating other aspects of the infrastructure necessary for the delivery of behavioral services within the United States. He provided guidance and support to numerous state behavior analysis associations as they sought to develop recognition for behavior analysis, access to funding streams, and in some cases professional licensure. At the national level, Jerry supported Autism Speaks in their pursuit of health-insurance reform legislation and served as a charter board member of the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts. Although the service-delivery infrastructure for behavior analysis is not yet complete, Jerry's unparalleled vision and productivity guaranteed that it will be.

Jerry Remembered

The field will remember Jerry as its chief ambassador for behavior analysis as a unique profession. Families of individuals who receive behavioral services will remember him as their advocate for improvement in the availability and quality of treatment. And those who knew him casually will remember him as a consummate professional. We will remember Jerry serving these roles, but we also will remember him as a kind and unassuming person who never had an axe to grind, as a man deeply devoted to family and friends who always was willing to drop what he was doing and lend a hand, as a connoisseur on a wide range of topics (stereo systems, rare books, historical documents, sailboats, Porsches, and sartorial fine points), and as a fun-loving guy with the crooked smile who could double you over laughing with a precious one liner. Many were fortunate to know Jerry in these ways, but those who did not will benefit nevertheless from his tireless efforts on their behalf.

Author Notes

Brian Iwata co-chaired Jerry's dissertation committee and collaborated with Jerry during their years in Maryland, Washington, DC, and Florida. Mark Sundberg was a graduate student with Jerry at Western Michigan University and worked for Jerry at Kalamazoo Valley Multihandicap Center (KVMC). James Carr worked with Jerry on the Behavior Analysis Certification Board (BACB) Board of Directors from 2009–2011 and was honored to succeed Jerry as the BACB chief executive officer.

Address correspondence to Brian Iwata, Psychology Department, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, 32611. E-mail: iwata@ufl.edu.

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